DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 498 EC 231 819

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TITLE	Fostering the Postsecondary Aspirations of Gifted Urban Minority Students. ERIC Digest #E493.
INSTITUTION	Council for Exceptional Children, Reston, Va.; ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, Va.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	90
CONTRACT	RI88062007
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Aspiration; *Career Planning; Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Counseling; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; High Schools; *Minority Groups; Parent School Relationship; Student Educational Objectives; *Student Needs; *Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the special needs of gifted urban minority students in the selection of postsecondary career and educational options. Noted is the frequent lack of family encouragement in this population toward higher education and career achievement. Suggestions are offered for teachers, students, counselors, administrators, and parents. These include: continuous gentle persuasion and provision of contact with successful minority professions (teachers); informing gifted minority students of educational options and working with parents to find sources of financial aid (counselors); serving as an advocate through contact with community service organizations, recognition of the achievements and potential of individual students, and rallying the school community behind able students (administrators). Noted are the possible effects of the student's aspirations on his/her position in the family. Contains 10 references. (DB)

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ED321498

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ERIC Digest

DIGEST #E493

EC-90

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FOSTERING THE POSTSECONDARY ASPIRATIONS OF GIFTED URBAN MINORITY STUDENTS

On a beautiful spring day, as Maria was getting help with a paper she was writing, she said, "I'm going to hate working inside for the rest of my life."

I laughed and said, "It depends on what kind of job you have whether or not you have to work inside."

She looked both puzzled and surprised and then responded, "But I'm going to be a secretary," thus implying that her workdays would be spent indoors.

Stunned, I asked her why on earth she planned to be a secretary. She told me that her mother had always told her that being a secretary was "the very best job."

Why was I stunned that this 15-year-old Mexican-American girl planned to be a secretary? Because she attends a magnet school for gifted adolescents, scores at the 99th percentile on achievement tests, has an IQ that indicates superior intelligence, is highly creative, and has extraordinary writing ability.

Is this situation unique? Or is a discrepancy between actual potential and self-perceived potential common among gifted urban minority youth? Tragically, it appears to be the norm rather than the exception. Throughout their childhood, gifted students from middle- to upper-middle-class homes hear an achievement message, which includes plans for attending a good college or university. Many of these students have parents who attended college or who at least believe that a college education is essential in order to better oneself.

On the other hand, gifted students from lower-socioeconomic-status homes often have a different message communicated to them: Education is not essential to "making it" in the world. Getting and keeping a "job" is the goal, as opposed to choosing and being satisfied with the "career" to which middle-socioeconomic-status students aspire. Going beyond the high school diploma is generally seen as an unnecessary waste of time and money. Long-range goals are not a real part of urban minority families' schema; they tend to focus on the immediate future. The aspiration to achieve by capitalizing on one's intelligence and creativity is rarely fostered by these families. In fact, even if it is stimulated elsewhere, it may be suppressed by family pressure.

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Gifted students "do not stop being gifted when they turn eighteen" (Daniel, 1985, p. 235), and just as they have needed differentiated attention focused on their elementary, middle, and high school education, so do they need differentiated attention focused on their postsecondary experience. If changes are to be made in the attitudes of gifted urban minority youth so that they seek the requisite college experiences, changes must be made in the attitudes of those people who have the most influence over their education. Teachers, counselors, principals, parents, and the students themselves must become more attentive to the differential requirements of this population of gifted students. These suggestions for consciousness-raising presented here are based on experience gained while working with gifted urban minority students in a large metropolitan area.

Teachers

For many gifted urban minority students, their teachers are the main, and sometimes only, source of encouragement and information regarding educational opportunities. A teacher's influence is immeasurable: A single teacher can be the catalyst for ensuring that a bright youth expands and develops himself or herself by attending college. In order to be this catalyst, however, the teacher must be aware and take steps toward fostering the notion that the student can have a better chance to succeed if a college education is sought and obtained.

First of all, teachers of gifted urban minority youth need to realize that there is a disparity between their aspirations for these students and the aspirations of the students themselves. Part of it can be attributed to a cultural difference, since the ranks of teachers are predominantly filled with people from middle-class backgrounds. Teachers should be sensitive to differences, but not judgmental, and should not assume that the students' background is deficient.

Second, teachers must realize that, as they begin to encourage these able students to attend college, some defensive attitudes may surface in both students and parents. Marion pointed out that

> A major need of black parents of low socioeconomic gifted and talented children is the maintenance of a normal family-school relationship. This is often the most difficult hurdle for parents and teachers to overcome, for giftedness and talentedness are not the necessary "looked for" virtues in many low-socioeconomic children. (1981, p. 33)

Defensiveness may manifest itself as students belligerently claim that they do not even want to go to college ("Who needs it anyway?") or as they nonchalantly accept material that is offered. Teachers must realize that these behaviors are often indicative that a student is receiving negative messages from home concerning college attendance. Continued gentle persuasion must be offered to such students and their parents.

Close and sensitive contact with parents is one way that teachers can have the desired influence on bright urban minority students' postsecondary aspirations. Telephone contacts, letters about upcoming college introductory events, information about scholarships, and personal conferences are all recommended for establishing and maintaining a rapport that will be conducive to parents' acceptance of a young person's going to college.

Just as frequent contact with parents is necessary to inculcate the idea of college for their children, so too is it necessary for the students to hear the message. It will take more than a few casual references dropped into conversations to instill this idea. Teachers must make a deliberate effort to establish with these students the idea that they should attend college and are capable of doing so.

In addition to talking directly to students about college, teachers can invite others to do so. For example, minority adults who have succeeded in business, education, the arts, or the professions could be invited as guest speakers. These adults can share with the students how they chose the college or university they did, how they financed their college education, how long it took them, what adjustments they had to make in college, and what benefits they have derived from the college experience.

Teachers can also keep a bulletin board on which they and members of the class can post newspaper and magazine articles regarding scholarships, grants, and other opportunities for minority students. Gifted education journals and newsletters (both state and national) carry such announcements, and the teacher or selected students could be responsible for monitoring these journals at the local university or public library.

A final awareness that teachers must have regarding their gifted urban minority students is the anxiety that many of these students feel regarding their post-high-school life. Some are the first in their family to finish high school. This accomplishment alone presents them with choices for which no family member has set a precedent and affords them opportunities for which they have no family role model. Others have already determined that they want further education and are fearful of the battle they anticipate when their parents become aware of these plans. A portion of these students are apprehensive regarding their ability to measure up, intellectually and financially, to the task of college participation. Teachers should make an effort to allay some of these fears and provide strategies that will enable students to accept and deal rationally with them.

Counselors

Because of the void that exists between high school counseling and college advising (Grites, 1979) and because of the additional obstacles and pressures that impinge on gifted urban minority students who attend college, the school counselor's role in preparing gifted urban minority youth for appropriate postsecondary school education cannot be underestimated. According to Dunham and Russo, counselors

> are needed to help direct the career education program for the gifted disadvantaged students. They are also needed for individual counseling to point out educational and career possibilities for each student. The counselor must be aware of the needs and obstacles that create problems for these students. (1983, p. 26)

More than other gifted students, gifted urban minority youth must have strong guidance in this area. In the recent Carnegie Report on teaching as a profession, the statement was made that "good counseling is indispensable for poor and minority youngsters, who often have few others to turn to for advice" (1986, p. 14). Counselors must take an early and active role in implanting the idea of college, lining up college recruiters, and obtaining financial aid for these students.

Impressing gifted urban minority students with the importance of attending college may involve the counselor in designing a career awareness program that iterates the educational preparations necessary for various career fields. Such a program should be an ongoing effort that integrates all that the counselor can determine about student interests, career availability, and community mores.

School counselors traditionally work with college recruiters, but the job becomes more involved when the recruits are gifted students from urban minority backgrounds. Counselors can work to raise the consciousness of recruiters regarding the differing demands of attracting bright urban youth. College recruiters need to realize that, to a greater extent than with other students, the parents must also be convinced—not just to send their child to XYZ college, but to send their child to *any* college.

In working with parents, the question "How much is this going to cost?" naturally arises. For low-socioeconomic-status parents, the cost of college tuition, room and board, books, and travel is a burden they cannot bear. Financial aid must be sought for these students—from the colleges and universities they will attend, from foundations, from the U.S. government, from service clubs and organizations, and from private individuals. Laying the groundwork for this sort of commitment is the most difficult part of the task. Once organizations and individuals have donated money and have seen the enormous positive results of their investment, they will continue to give. But the initial contacts require time and effort.

Even if a student receives a full scholarship, one aspect of college expense that is not covered by financial aid is the cost of "keeping up with the Joneses," that is, the cost of fitting in. The culture shock will be severe enough that the minority urban gifted student's trauma need not be accentuated by feeling completely out of place due to inappropriate clothing and the lack of ability to go out and grab a pizza. Counselors soliciting money for this sort of student support must make a strong case to potential contributors. They may find that successful minority adults who attended expensive, respected colleges or universities under a severe

financial hardship are inclined to be supportive of such a worthwhile cause.

Another program that counselors could implement is one that teaches the social graces. While some would argue that brains, not table manners, will propel these students to where they want to be, our contention is that lack of table manners or the inability to respond appropriately in social situations can hinder bright students from attaining their potential. As Moore has stated, for gifted disadvantaged students "career education programs need to stress professional lifestyles, values, ethics, and goals" (1979, p. 20).

Early in gifted students' middle school and high school careers, counselors should begin to help them become cognizant of the criteria colleges and universities use in selecting among their applicants. This information can be obtained from college catalogs, by writing to admissions directors, or from recruiters. Charts of the criteria used by various schools could be posted in the counselors' offices, or general recommendations regarding courses taken, grades, test scores, and participation in extracurricular activities could be stressed with individual students. This must be done as early as possible so that students can take the necessary steps to ensure their acceptance by the college of their choice.

Administrators

Principals, assistant principals, and deans of instruction fill many roles, and those in schools that serve urban minority students function in additional capacities. The gifted members of this urban population need the administrators as their advocates.

The administrator can serve as advocate for minority urban gifted students in a number of ways. One way is as a contact person between the school and service organizations. The administrator of the school is one of the few members of the faculty who can attend daytime service club luncheons. Since these organizations are often looking for worthy causes to support, the administrator can inform them of the financial and personal needs of gifted students and can assure them of the potential of these students. Members of these organizations may choose to offer personal support by serving as mentors for one or more students.

Administrators must also recognize the enormous impact that they can have on these minority gifted students. Middle school and high school administrators who recognize the uniqueness and potential residing in particular students can make a special effort to offer personal support and encouragement. A student's life can be significantly affected by an administrator who takes the time to recognize achievements, provide solace for failures, and offer challenges for the future.

Administrators who have made their careers in one school district and one school often maintain contact with former students who have distinguished themselves in their postsecondary lives. Many of these former students would be willing to return to the school to visit informally with students or make presentations to classes or groups of students. Students will often hear what a person from similar circumstances has to say better than they will hear what a teacher or other community member says.

An administrator who is supportive of students who have extraordinary potential will realize that there are instances when certain teachers need extra time to work with gifted students. They may need time to plan in-depth lessons, take students on field trips, investigate a source for future reference, or consult with people who might contribute to the students' knowledge. Administrators have the latitude to make the necessary arrangements so that teachers can meet gifted students' learning needs.

Administrators can help rally teachers, counselors, and community members to a common effort to ensure not only that these bright students are not hindered in their effort to achieve excellence, but that they are facilitated in that effort. A principal can remove obstacles and prevent confrontations by smoothing the way and offering support.

Parents

Parents of gifted urban minority students are in a tough situation, which may result in push-me/pull-me messages being communicated to their children. On the one hand, parents are proud that their children do well in school and receive good grades and various honors—and, in fact, do better than they ever did in school. On the other hand, parents sometimes do not understand the extent of their gifted child's intelligence and may even be suspicious of it, possibly fearing that since their child is smart, he or she may try to be the boss of the house. A confusion of roles often results, particularly in Mexican-American homes where the children speak English and the parents do not, thus requiring that the children interact and interpret the world for their parents.

It is important for parents and children to be aware of the proper roles that each should play. Parents do need to be in charge of the home, while at the same time realizing that their children have needs and wants requiring their support and attention.

Parental support is also vital for gifted urban minority students while they are attending college. Based on the recent rash of data concerning "retention" of bright students in college, Laycock stated that

> One should expect the brightest to do the best, and therefore to finish what they begin. But SAT scores and class rank, the traditional admissions criteria, are not fully predictive. *More powerful may be family influences related to expectations, supportiveness, and sense of direction* [emphasis added]. (1984, p. 91)

Parents need to realize how powerful their influence is and how necessary their encouragement is. Gifted urban minority students need to know that their parents are proud of them and that they accept what their sons and daughters are doing.

Parents who have not attended college cannot empathize, but they can try to listen when their children have concerns about college and their participation in the college experience. Also, although parents may not realize the specific value of participating in more of the college experience than just attending classes, they should allow their children to take advantage of as many opportunities as are available to them.

Students

Gifted students in general are notorious for underestimating their ability. Gifted urban minority students are even less likely to assess their giftedness correctly. It will take a concerted effort over a period of years to convey to these young people the extent of their extraordinary ability and potential. They will need to be told, shown, exhorted, and badgered, time and time again, until they begin to comprehend that they have more to offer and more to gain, and therefore more to lose, than many of their age mates.

A concerted effort will also be necessary to instill the notion that college, and often graduate school, will be necessary for these highly able students to obtain the skills and education requisite for pursuing a chosen career. The difficulty of inculcating this idea into the schema of many of these gifted urban minority students cannot be underestimated. In many instances, it is a battle against generations of the belief of inherent inferiority.

These alterations are very likely to cause a change in a gifted minority student's position in the family. It is possible that the student's status will increase in the eyes of some family members, while in the eyes of others, the student will be seen as selling out or running out on family and culture (Gowan, 1960). This sort of mixed message, which includes rejection and guilt, will undoubtedly be a cause for distress in these able students, who tend to be highly sensitive (Colangelo & Exum, 1979). Counselors in high school can help warn students ahead of time about the possible ramifications of college attendance, or it may be necessary for counselors at colleges and universities to seek out students coming from impoverished backgrounds to determine whether or not they need help coping with the changes that are occurring in their family constellations. In addition, college and university counselors may need to implement support groups for gifted college freshmen to help them adjust successfully to college life (Friedlander & Watkins, 1984).

Once gifted urban minority students have recognized the worth in pursuing postsecondary education, they will need to take an active role in ferreting out scholarships and grants. They cannot depend on counselors to do this, even though in many cases, doing so is considered part of the job.

Conclusion

Gifted urban minority youth are fighting a number of uphill battles. However, the battles they fight and win have many more far-reaching ramifications than simply developing individual students' minds. Every time one of these students succeeds, his or her horizons are broadened, the vistas of his or her family are expanded, the reach of his or her community is extended, and the nation benefits. We have been considered "a nation at risk"; we can no longer afford to allow some of our most talented students to remain in an untenable life situation.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI88062007. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.